

MY MARRIAGE.

(Temple Bar.)

[Truth is said to be stranger than fiction, and amid the surroundings of everyday life many an unexpected romance is known. The following, by M. A. de Saint-Preuve, published in the *Confessions of a Frenchman*, is a story of the kind, and one which still lives a prominent figure in Parisian society.]

CHAPTER I.

My day's work done, I often went to refresh myself with a stroll in the gardens of the Luxembourg. I met there some of my literary friends. I love these gardens, which recall every period from the Renaissance to our own times.

One evening, walking with Elouard I met, there passed a young girl in a plain black dress. She was light and graceful as beauty itself, her dark hair soft and wavy, her eyes of heaven's own blue, the expression ideal—a veritable type of beauty.

"See," said I to Elouard, "the image of a destiny passing."

"That woman in black" he exclaimed.

"Yes," I replied; "between us I feel an invisible bond, some fatal charm."

I wished to follow the young girl, but respect restrained me; besides her grandmother was walking with her. "And yet," said I to my friend, "it is a real sorrow to feel I may never see her again."

And we talked long of those chance meetings in which two souls seem for an instant to meet, and by a look to pledge themselves to each other for life.

That same evening I went to drink tea at a friend's in the Faubourg St. Germain. Imagine my surprise to see arrive the girl of my dream, Dr. F., accompanied by her grandmother. With much emotion I rose and bowed, and wished not to go on with a story I had begun to tell. But my hostess said she could not allow it to be discontinued. "Well, then, proceed," I said. But instead of proceeding with the story as I began, she introduced the young girl in black, keeping myself carefully out of the scene.

My hostess, who seemed to have a vague consciousness of our meeting, was somewhat puzzled as I sketched a theory of souls predestined by an anterior life—a life begun there, to be continued here, and to end in some ideal future heaven. To strengthen my theory, I spoke of one of my friends, who, on the point of marrying some one who loved him much, and whom he thought he much loved, had met, at the very moment he was dreaming of his fiancée, a young girl whom he had never before seen, but yet whom he instantly seemed to know better than he with whom for so long he had spent every evening.

My hostess broke in with, "Your friend is a visionary. He loved his fiancée beloved; but if one glance from a stranger could carry him into the seventh heaven, he certainly did not deserve the happiness of simple mortals."

She then, with a smile, said, "I am not romantic, but I am a fatalist; what is written is written. It is ordained above that his fiancée is not to be his wife, neither the notary with his contract nor the mayor with his seal can alter it."

Her uncle laughed. "In faith," he said, "my niece seems to read the stars."

"I," she cried, gayly—"I am content to read crises; for what is written above is written on her palms."

I ventured to say to her, "Will you give me your hand, Mademoiselle?"

"Yes and no," she replied, laughing; but she held out her hand, and turning towards her uncle, said, "You do not mind me having my fortune told?"

"Certainly not, as you won't hear one word of truth. . . . And why? Because one must live without knowledge of the morrow."

But my uncle, who might as well tell me that I must walk without knowing where I am going."

"And when one starts who does know," he said, "whether his steps will carry him?"

However, I still held the little hand, of which at a glance I had read every line. I had so completely lost myself in the geography of that unknown world that I was silent, as if I wished to keep my discovery to myself.

"Come, come," said my hostess, "what is it you read in that palm?"

And I had to read out the cabalistic signs of the hand that lay in mine. And when I had finished a pretty friend of the hostess declared that I was as one who translates Hebrew without knowledge of the tongue.

This, however, did not prevent her from giving me her hand, to know whether a second seer would be right, and when I had promised not to know a second spring, but the delights of a St. Martin's summer, she confessed that I had converted her—I had given her faith.

"You know," I said, with a little pressure of acknowledgment, "that I am madly in love with that young girl."

"Every one must see that," she answered; "the young girl is the only one who remains blind."

"Dr. F. asked for his carriage. I bent over my mistress's hand, and there were gone. Taking the longest way home, I passed before the Luxembourg Gardens, as if I should again see that vision through the railings."

"Ah, it was but a vision," I said sadly.

CHAPTER II.

I often went with Jules Janin to a very hospitable and charming house in the Rue du Four-St. Germain. There everything was patriarchal—the appearance of our hosts in keeping with the ancient furniture and the pictures on the walls: nothing was of to-day.

The years of wife and husband then reckoned more than a century and a half; but they loved youth, and once a week welcomed a crowd of young people, who were all very much at home. A ray of dawn, a dance, private theatricals, all enjoyed with heart and soul. In such a house what could one do but fall in love? I was soon madly in love—even to the madness of marriage; which madness those around me called wisdom. I was caught by the most beautiful eyes in the world, large, soft, velvety dark eyes, set in one of those adorable faces of Roman Madonnas, the lines of which were as fine as a line of silk.

Nothing in her of the French character; nothing of the Parisienne. It was Lullu who led us into this mischief. In those days I still played the violin, she played the piano—it was ten years before the advent of Gounod—and we wandered away into the forgotten world of old French music. I could not tell what delight we strayed and searched through *Armida* and the other operas of that strange master, whom I still worship. In a word—was it Lullu, was it my violin or my piano, was it her twenty years or my twenty-five years?

We adored one another. We could not live, she without hearing me, I without seeing her.

Almost a whole winter was spent thus. Our love, a secret to ourselves, was a secret to everybody. The question was, "When is the marriage?" We were so happy in our dream that we feared to make it reality. But this could not last forever. The grandfather and the grandmother of Mlle. Yvonne II. called me one evening into the little drawing-room, and said they were heart-broken at what was happening. They had never intended that their dear child should marry an artist, but had looked forward to bestowing her on a man of assured position; but since she had the misfortune to love me, they were willing to sacrifice their ambition and to grant me her hand.

The hand, so white and unguessed, I had not asked for, but I simply answered, "With all my heart." At once everything was decided; the marriage was fixed for Easter week. This would just give me time to see my father and to begin to introduce them to the family, and make ready a nest for ourselves. On this Mlle. II. was called in. She bent down to kiss her grandmother, but I caught her in my arms; the grandfather was about to speak, but she put her hand on his lips.

"No," she said, "I understand all. I am so happy."

We finished the evening with Lullu, Mozart, and Gluck—discreet friends, these *Armida*, *La Noce de Figaro*, *Orpheus*, we could continue our dreams without dread of any rough awakening from the harmony of that music. Very shortly after the betrothal dinner was given, followed by a ball, to which, although the intention had been to make it a family fete, a few invitations were dropped among the artistic world.

The dinner, which I rather seriously, remarked, was very gay. However, a cloud on the face of my fiancée, it seemed as if while trying to smile she had a look of sadness, and much as I said to her with my eyes, her own remained anxious. There are presentiments which do not deceive.

CHAPTER III.

YVONNE AND FANNIE.

The guests began to arrive; the ball opened with a waltz, which I danced with Yvonne. The second quadrille was just beginning when the finger of destiny again showed itself. A young girl, supremely beautiful, entered the room, accompanied by her aunt, Madame de Saint-Preuve, then very much the fashion. My fiancée, delighted to see these ladies, whom she knew but slightly, came to me to beg I would at once ask Mademoiselle Fannie's hand for the dance. I went straight to her. Imagine my surprise to discover in the young girl in white the young girl in black whom I had met in the Luxembourg Gardens. You may remember that I exclaimed, "See my destiny passing!" The words returned to my mind, so that I found myself standing before her silent and troubled. When I recovered myself sufficiently to ask her to dance she accepted readily, and in a moment we were dancing *vis-a-vis* to my fiancée and her partner. In society I occasionally met Mlle. de Saint-Preuve—the Baroness Molitor—and this fact was sufficient to start our conversation.

When I guess everything, Mlle. Fannie said to me almost at once: "It is you, Monsieur, who are going to marry Mlle. II.?"

"Do you think so?" I replied, half sceptically.

"Whom else could you find so beautiful?"

I was silent, thunderstruck; my heart rebelled within me. At this moment came the ladies' chain, and I was recalled by Mlle. Yvonne's hand. "Come," I said to myself, "this is not a romance."

"The face of your fiancée is my ideal," continued Mademoiselle Fannie. "Then you do not admire your own face?"

"Not at all."

And, as if to give herself the lie, she stood triumphant in the residence of her dazzling beauty. Mademoiselle II. was a girl of the passive type, noble, serious beauty of the French type. Fannie had the face which has been immortalized by sculptors and painters—Jouffroy, Diaz, Leumann, Vidal—the Greek type; and the Parisian character; an ideal profile; a spiritual expression; hair black, wavy, and rebellious. Large blue eyes lit up her face, and a charming smile played around lips rosy red as cherries.

Watching her that evening, with the eyes of an artist and poet, it was impossible not to regret my plighted word, and unconsciously I found myself ceaselessly repeating, "My destiny! my destiny!"

How was it that I found myself at supper seated between Yvonne and Fannie?

"Do you know," said Mademoiselle II., "that you have eyes only for your neighbor?"

"Do you not know that you dwell in my heart? All other women are but birds of passage there."

"Oh, I am not jealous; for if it is written above that you are not to marry me, vain would it be for me to try and keep you. But tell me frankly, do you not think Mademoiselle Fannie more beautiful than you think me?"

"You know well that to me you are the most beautiful of the beautiful, because I love you."

Yes, in spite of this—whether by gallantry or attraction—I was irresistibly drawn to the other side. Hardly did I turn to Mademoiselle II. but I wished to resume my talk with Fannie. The moment for adieu came. Mademoiselle Fannie left, after shaking hands with Mademoiselle Yvonne.

"Adieu," I said to my fiancée. Her grandmother, standing near, whispered, with a smile:

"You may kiss her."

Yvonne bent her head. My lips touched her forehead—an absent kiss, which rose not from the heart, which went not to the heart.

It was as if the tie between us was severed.

That night I returned home profoundly saddened, and with the unpassed Rubicon before me, I arranged myself before myself, making my conscience my judge; and the judge condemned me, and overruled me with bitter reproaches at having too lightly possessed myself of this defenceless young heart.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST KISS.

Madame de Saint-Preuve had reproached me for not having called upon her. The next morning, as I was returning from a jeweller in the Palais Royal, my thoughts occupied by my wedding present, I saw her carriage in the Place du Carrousel. She stopped the coachman and beckoned to me.

"What is the meaning of all this?" she said. "You are massing hearts. My niece is a jewel of a girl."

"I don't know a jewel of a girl," I said; "she talks of no one but you."

"Be quick and marry Mademoiselle II., or I can answer for nothing."

These words troubled me more than I can say. I was at once enraptured and desolated.

"Your niece," said I, "is a beautiful creature who will never love but herself; she has too much success in the world to give a second thought to an insignificant man like me."

"Besides, every woman must obey her destiny."

"Again destiny!" I cried. "Do you believe in that?"

"Do I believe? See, your destiny and mine have just met; what will they do with us? I don't know; but be sure they are now hand in hand, even if it is to betray us. Be this as it may, hurry on your marriage."

"Why? I do not know. What I do know is, that she has done nothing but cry, and she is crying still."

"Will you allow me to see her with you?"

"No; but I will ask her to get up, if only for a moment."

Yvonne refused to get up; I therefore begged her grandmother to take her to the carriage, and I wished to see her to-day, to-morrow, for ever."

"She replied by the one word, 'Never.'"

I showed this to her grandmother, who said: "This is childish; I will bring her to you." And Yvonne soon appeared, pale and trembling.

I was about to kiss her as the evening before, but her hand kept me back. I wished to kiss her hand, when I felt the earrings drop into mine.

"I have come," she said, "to give you back these earrings; you know I cannot accept them."

Doubtless the sadness of my face touched her heart; for though she had intended to return to her room she sat down by the fire.

"Come, come, that's right," said the grandmother; "be happy since you are happy." And she left us to ourselves.

Sad tale! It was in vain we sought to recapture the paradise of our love; the gate was closed.

I left Mademoiselle II. promising to return in the evening and drink tea with her and her grandmother. Fannie's name was not once mentioned between us, but her image had with Yvonne, as with me, frozen our interview.

I was engaged that evening to a ball in the Rue de la Cerisier. I had made up my mind I would not go, but destiny herself put on my white cravat for me. Well, hardly had I arrived when I saw Mademoiselle Fannie enter. The young man crowded around her, imploring some a waltz, some a quadrille. I alone pretended not to see her. I could not look at her without seeing Mademoiselle II. Passing me presently, she said, "You know I have kept the first waltz for you." Another moment, and she would have died; but how could I fly this witchery? I was caught in a golden snare. I waited.

When the hour of my appointment came I had forgotten Mademoiselle II. When I remembered her it was too late. I went down stairs, however, but among the carriages not a cab was to be found. It was raining a torrent. I went back, saying, "Destiny has decided."

And indeed I did not see Mademoiselle II. again.

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBLE ROMANCE.

Next day Yvonne refused to receive me. Her grandmother, who knew that I had spent the night at a ball at which I had met Mademoiselle Fannie, told me I was acting abominably. I tried to convince her that it was all the work of chance, and that I still held to my word. She replied that she preferred that her dear granddaughter should be unhappy for one day rather than unhappy all her life.

I went away half-mad, thinking I had sacrificed all my happiness.

That evening a friend of the family brought me the earrings and some letters of mine in a sealed envelope. Speaking of the grief of Mademoiselle II. he said:

"She has too much pride not to overcome her heart. Hers is a noble nature; but since you are on the road to marriage, I advise you to marry Mademoiselle Fannie."

"But there has never been a word of love breathed between us."

"Oh, that is not the point. Besides, no one will be able to find a stone at you, for you are sacrificing a large fortune to a small fortune."

"I assure you that if ever I marry I shall not take that into account. For me the fortune in marriage is the woman."

"Quite right; and console yourself. Mademoiselle Fannie is as fine a woman as Mademoiselle II."

I spoke that evening aimlessly wandering about the quays; I sought but solitude. What could I do? Was I to force myself upon Mademoiselle II. and convince her that my heart and life were hers? or was I to allow myself to be swept away in the world's current and break my will, perhaps my heart? When midnight struck at the clock of the Institute I was crossing the Pont des Arts, still possessed by the eyes of an artist and poet. It was impossible not to regret my plighted word, and unconsciously I found myself ceaselessly repeating, "My destiny! my destiny!"

How was it that I found myself at supper seated between Yvonne and Fannie?

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